

REVIEW: *THE EARLY HISTORY OF MONGOLIA*

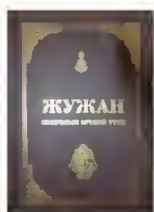
Reviewed by Mátyás Balogh (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)



Delgerjargal, P. (П. Дэлгэржаргал) and Z. Batsaihan (З. Батсайхан) (D. Erdenebaatar (Д. Эрдэнэбаатар), ed). 2017. *Hünnü (Хүннү) [The Xiongnu]*. Ulaanbaatar. 252 pages [238 + 2 (list of images) + 12 (bibliography)], 1 map, 36 images. ISBN 978-99978-58-03-0 (hardback).



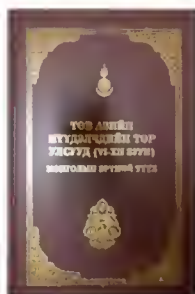
Delgerjargal, P. (П. Дэлгэржаргал) and S. Ölziibayar (С. Өлзийбаяр), ed). 2017. *Syan'bi (Сяньбу) [The Xianbei]*. Ulaanbaatar. 227 pages [215 + 3 (list of images) + 9 (bibliography)] 3 maps, 70 images. ISBN 978-99978-58-07-8 (hardback).



Enhbat, A. (А. Энхбат) and S. Ölziibayar (С. Өлзийбаяр) (Ch. Amartüvshin (Ч. Амартүвшин, ed). 2017. *Jujan (Жужан) [The Rouran]*. Ulaanbaatar. 229 pages [206 + 1 (explanation to the appendixes) + 13 appendixes + 7 (bibliography)], 1 map. ISBN 978-99978-58-05-4 (hardback).



Batsüren, B. (Б. Батсүрэн) and P. Mönhtulga (P. Мөнхтулга) (A. Enhtör, (А. Энхтөр), ed). 2017. *Türeg, Uigur (Түрэг, Уйгур) [Turks and Uighurs]*. Ulaanbaatar. 250 pages [239 + 11 (bibliography)], 6 maps, 6 images. ISBN 978-99978-58-04-7 (hardback).



Batsüren, B. (Б. Батсүрэн), E. Chimeddorj (Э. Чигмэддорж), and B. Chinzorig [(Б. Чинзориг) (С. Cerendorj (Ц. Цэрэндорж), ed). 2017. *Töv Aziin nüüdelchdiin tör ulsuud (VI - XII зуун) (Төв Азийн нүүдэлчдийн төр улсууд (VI - XII зуун) [Inner Asian Nomadic Polities (VI-XII Centuries)]*. Ulaanbaatar. 212 pages [198 + 14 (bibliography)], 3 maps, 17 images. ISBN 978-99978-58-06-1 (hardback).

The five books listed above comprise a book series titled *Mongoliin Ertнii Түүh* (Монголын эртний түүх) [*The Early History of Mongolia*] (henceforth MET), which was published in 2017 in Ulaanbaatar under the general editorship of P. Delgerjargal (П. Дэлгэржаргал) and B. Batsüren (Б. Батсүрэн). No publisher's name is given. The printer is listed as Соёмбо Принтинг 'Soyombo Printing'. The series is the result of cooperation between МУИС-ийн Монгол Судладын Хүрээлэн 'The Mongolian Studies Institute of Mongolian National University (MUIS)', МУИС-ийн Түүхийн Тэнхим (History department faculty of the foregoing university), and ШУА-ийн Түүх Археологийн Хүрээлэн 'The History and Archaeology Institute of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences'.

In terms of pricing, I searched the internet in early August 2017, and only found the Hünнü volume, which was offered by a bookstore for 172,000 *tögrögs*.¹ Our faculty received these books as a gift from MUIS and I am unsure how these books might be obtained outside Mongolia.

Devoted to roughly one and a half millennia of history from the third century BC to the thirteenth century, the volumes are:

- 1 The Xiongnu
- 2 The Xianbei
- 3 The Rouran
- 4 Turks and Uighurs
- 5 Inner Asian Nomadic Polities (VI-XII centuries)

The MET volumes are not the first works that cover the history of the above peoples and published in Cyrillic Mongolian. The works of Dorjsüren (1961) and Sühbaatar (1971, 1992) on the Xiongnu, Xianbei, and Rouran well before the turn of the twenty-first century remain important secondary sources for today's historians in Mongolia. In the early twenty-first century, research on the ancient history of the Mongolian steppes gained new momentum in Mongolia, and several new histories were published. These included works on the Xiongnu (Batsaihan 2003, Ganbaatar 2008), and a bit later, materials on other

¹ On 6 August 2017, this was equal to approximately seventy-one USD.

nomadic peoples (Batsüren 2009, 2016; Dashceren 2014). The publication of MET can be seen as a peak - hopefully not an unsurmountable one - of this momentum, which increased scholarly activity in this field of research.

Each volume of the series begins with opening remarks by the Mongolian President, Cahiagiin Elbegdorj (b. 1963), that mention *Mongolchuudiin бүтэсэн түүх* 'history created by the Mongols' and *bidnii түүх* 'our history', i.e., the history of the Mongols.

As can be seen from the titles of the volumes, the focus is on the histories of peoples that inhabited the Mongolian Plateau and adjacent regions prior to the appearance of the Mongols as a nation. Therefore, the title suggesting the history of Mongolia, is more or less accurate, but the President's words are misleading (more on this later). The Mongols did not create a large part of the history under discussion. Instead, it was created by the Xiongnu, Xianbei, Rouran, Turks, Uighurs, the Chinese, and other groups living on both sides of the Great Wall. History is generally not created by one people.

The Mongols as a people, and not as a tribe or federation of tribes, appeared in history in 1206, when Chinggis Khan founded the Mongolian Empire. Previously, the Mongol tribes were few of the many contenders for power on the eastern fringes of the Mongolian Plateau. Their political existence until the mid-eleventh century, when their incursions began causing serious problems for the Jurchen Jin-Dynasty's northwestern frontiers, did not play an important role in the history of the region.

The volumes are generally good summaries of previous studies on each subject with an extensive use of primary sources that are predominantly Chinese chronicles. Russian literature dominates the secondary sources, but Western and modern Chinese scholarship are also represented.

The topics of the volumes and their chapters revolve around the concept of ethnicity, as most of the titles suggest. In the Xianbei volume we find chapters, for example, on the Tuyuhun Kingdom and the different Yan dynasties, which were all established by the Murong Tribe of the Xianbei. Another chapter of the same volume deals with the successful dynasty of the Tabgach people (also a branch of the Xianbei), the Northern Wei. The Tuyuhun Kingdom was located

roughly in what is today Qinghai Province in China, which is rather far from Mongolia or the Mongolian steppes. Similarly, the Yan dynasties were not rulers of the steppe region, but of Northeast China - the territories in present-day Beijing and Hebei, Liaoning, and even Henan provinces.

The emperors of the Northern Wei conquered and became masters of the whole of North China, with Luoyang (in contemporary Henan Province) as their capital. The histories of these people and their regimes cannot be referred to as parts of Mongolian history, nor as the history of Mongolia, either as a region (i.e., the Mongolian steppes), or as a country. This is why I earlier noted that the title of the series is only more or less accurate.

On the other hand, it is nearly impossible to grasp the history of the Mongolian steppe-region without becoming acquainted with the history of Northern China. Consequently, the history of the Murong and Tabgach cannot be detached from the history of the Mongolian steppes and it is favorable that it is included. However, one must not forget that in the era when the states of the Murong-Xianbei were established, and the Northern Wei was budding under the name of the Kingdom of Dai, more than a dozen similar regimes of "barbarian" origin existed on the soil of Northern China. This era that lasted from 301 to 439 is often referred to as the Sixteen Kingdoms of the Five Barbarians and was a part of China's first great period of fragmentation (the whole period of fragmentation can be dated between 220 and 589) after the collapse of the Han Dynasty.

Apart from the Xianbei states, the Xiongnu (Huns), the Jie, the Di, and the Qiang also established their own ephemeral dynasties. Regrettably, none of these people and regimes are treated (except for a brief mention) in any of the volumes. The first and the third volumes could - and in my opinion should - have included chapters on these.

Similar to the second volume, the fifth volume contains a chapter on the Hyatan/Khitans (a people also from the Xianbei) Liao Dynasty, but does not dedicate one to the Jin of the Jurchen, nor the Xia of the Tangut, not to mention the several dynasties the Shatuo-Turks established in Northern China or the Uighur kingdoms in Qocho (modern Gaochang, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region) and

Ganzhou. These regimes existed during the second period of fragmentation that was brought about by the fall of the Tang Dynasty.

The "Xianbei" volume is the most satisfactory. In the foreword, the author lists the most important Xianbei tribes and other ethnic groups relevant to their history, and tells us which chapters of which Chinese chronicles mention them (pages 12–15). This volume is a concise, well-written history of not only the Xianbei but also their close relatives, the Wuhuan, and the predecessors of both, the Donghu. As mentioned above, this is the only volume that discusses some of the "Sixteen Kingdoms of the Five Barbarians."

One cannot read these volumes without wondering why from the above-mentioned frontier-states, only those established by the Xianbei and their descendants deserve to be parts of the history of Mongolia. One plausible explanation is that these ethnic groups were speakers of Mongolic (more precisely Para-Mongolic) languages and thus are treated by the authors as Mongols, while the founders of other dynasties had different linguistic affiliations (Turkic, Tibetan, and unknown). However, this could hardly be the reason for ignoring the other states, especially because these other states include those of the Xiongnu. In Mongolia, the Xiongnu are generally considered the Mongols' ancestors, and both the leadership and the common people of the country derive great pride from this hypothesized relationship.

The establishment of the Xiongnu Empire is viewed as the beginning of *tulgar tör* 'Mongolian statehood' and its anniversary is celebrated as a national holiday in Mongolia. Yet the Xiongnu dynasties of the fourth and fifth centuries, the Han of Liu Yuan, the Northern Liang of Juqu Mengxun, and the Great Xia of Helian Bobo are left unmentioned. Whatever the reason, the dismissal of these states both from the second and the first era of fragmentation is the most significant shortcoming of the series.

In summary, the series is a reader-friendly set of books featuring elaborate maps and quality illustrations. It gives a detailed, reliable description of the history of a given period, although the region and the groups of people it concerns are not clearly defined. In Mongolia, the series will likely soon appear on the bookshelves of both historians and those interested in history.

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